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ABSTRACT

A set of practical behavior change techniques for improving young children's classroom behavior are briefly discussed. Techniques are classified and discussed under two general categories: those that reduce frequency of behaviors ("sticks") and those that increase their frequency ("carrots"). Included under "sticks" are techniques such as ignoring the child's target behavior, time out (removing the child for a short time from all sources of attention), overcorrection and undoing (requiring the child to "overcorrect" his misbehavior in his own free time), and taking away privileges (for example, preventing the misbehaving child from participating in a favorite activity or playing with a preferred toy). Classified with the "carrots" are techniques such as giving attention and praising a positive behavior, shaping a behavior (breaking every target behavior into smaller components or steps, which are then reinforced), and contingencies and rules (having the child first demonstrate the target behavior before earning the privilege). To further illustrate how some of these "sticks" and "carrots" may be applied, seven typical and simplified cases are presented. (MP)

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IMPROVING CLASSROOM BEHAVIOR:

THE CARROT AND THE STICK

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IMPROVING CLASSROOM BEHAVIOR: THE CARROT AND THE STICK

ABSTRACT

The theoretical basis for our approach to classroom management lies in social learning theory. The purpose of this paper, however, is not to provide a comprehensive discussion of theory, but to describe briefly a set of practical techniques that can be applied in actual classroom settings. To further illustrate these techniques, we will present some typical cases and then discuss how this approach may be applied to them.

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Behavior

The focus of this approach is behavior. The first step in designing an effective classroom management program is to identify the behaviors to be changed (target behaviors) and to then describe them in very specific terms. For instance, specific target behaviors are "finishing assignments on time" or "talking out without permission"; however, "being motivated" or "acting responsibly" are descriptions that are too vague. The purpose of being specific is twofold: first, it encourages careful and objective evaluation of the child's behavior, and second, it is the basis of clear communication between teacher and student. A useful yardstick against which to evaluate whether behavioral descriptions are sufficiently specific is the question of whether an objective observer could count the number of times the target behavior occurs during the day. If he can, you have been specific enough; if he is confused, then in all likelihood the child will also be confused, and you must think further about your objectives.

Target behaviors must always be identified in pairs. One member of the pair is the behavior you want to reduce in frequency and the other is the opposite behavior, the one you want to increase in frequency. Behavior change techniques can be divided into two general categories: "sticks" are those techniques which reduce frequency of behaviors and "carrots" are those which increase their frequency.

Sticks

1. Ignoring a behavior is a very effective way of decreasing the frequency of that behavior. Ignoring means that absolutely no attention is paid to the child when he is exhibiting the target behavior; the teacher simply continues with what he or she is doing as if nothing disturbing is happening. "Ignoring" seems as if it should be easy to do but, in fact, it is very difficult to do correctly. Teachers should be aware that ignoring a behavior may initially make the behavior worse, and that it is very important not to attend (and unintentionally reinforce) this temporarily higher level of negative behavior. Instead, stay with the original plan and continue to ignore the behavior; this period of increased frequency will be short-lived and the situation will soon improve.

2. Time out is another way of decreasing the frequency of an undesirable behavior. Time out means that the child is removed from all sources of attention; in the process, both the child and the teacher get some time to "cool off". Time out should be reserved for only a few behaviors, behaviors that are very disruptive and that cannot be ignored, i.e., tantrums, continued arguing, or destructive behavior. It should not be used for simple noncompliance. If time out is overused, it will lose its effectiveness. Finding an appropriate time out place in a classroom is not easy and requires careful thought and often some creativity on the part of the teacher. A time out place should be a relatively uninteresting place where there is not much activity and where the child can be isolated from adult and peer attention. Coat rooms, halls, a corner of the classroom divided off by tall bookshelves or screens, or the nurse's or counselor's office have all been used successfully for time out. As soon as the child begins to misbehave (the target behavior has previously been identified and the time out process explained to the child), the teacher firmly says, "No _____" and takes or sends the child

to time out. Time out is to last for only a short time, i.e., 5 minutes; longer periods of isolation become banishment and are not effective in reducing misbehavior. At the end of the time out period, if the child is quiet, he may rejoin the class. Do not review with him what he did wrong; such discussions are forms of attention and serve only to reinforce the negative behavior. The disruptive behaviors for which time out is an appropriate intervention (i.e., tantrums) usually do not occur abruptly, but are the culmination of a sequence of events (i.e., a common sequence begins when the child is told "no" and he begins to argue, his arguing becoming more and more intense until it has become a tantrum). The key to using time out effectively is to recognize these sequences and intervene early in the process.

3. Overcorrection and undoing are processes that make use of natural consequences. The child is held accountable for his behavior, and if he misbehaves, he must "correct" the situation or "undo" his mistake. For instance, if he colors on the table, he must wipe it off; if he throws his paper on the floor, he must pick it up and put it in the waste-basket. In order to further "practice" behaving in the appropriate fashion, the child may be required to "over-correct" his misbehavior, i.e., the child must use some of his free time to wipe off all the desks and chairs in the classroom.

4. Taking away privileges is perhaps one of the most commonly used behavior change techniques. The idea of this technique is that if the child misbehaves, he is not allowed to participate in a favorite activity or play with a preferred toy. Losing recess, not being allowed to use the Playdoh, having to give up playing with the blocks, are all penalities frequently used in the classroom. It is important to let the child know what the consequence will be for a given misbehavior before that consequence is actually used. This information may be presented in the form of general classroom rules that apply to everyone, be explained in a private conference with a child, or be

presented as a "warning" when the undesirable behavior is first noted. Repeated warnings should be avoided; such repetitions without follow through are perceived as idle threats, and serve only to teach the child that adults do not "mean what they say" and may be ignored.

All these "sticks" are effective tools for reducing the frequency of problem behaviors. However, if only "sticks" are used, the improvements they bring about are likely to be temporary, disappearing with time. To bring about more long-lasting changes, "sticks" must be combined with "carrots", techniques designed to increase the frequency of behavior.

Carrots

1. Attention is probably the most powerful tool available to the teacher. Behaviors which get attention will almost invariably increase in frequency. Attention can take many forms. It is usually thought of in its positive form, i.e., compliments, hugs, pats on the shoulder, and praise. To be most effective, praise should focus on specific behaviors, and be informational rather than evaluative. "You picked up all the toys", "You started your work right away", "You remembered to put the crayons back" (as opposed to, "Good boy") are all examples of informational praise. Keep praise focused on the positive target behavior to be increased and avoid references to the negative behavior; i.e., "You put all the toys away, but next time don't jam them all in one box", or "You remembered to hang up your coat this morning; if you'd just try, you could remember all the time!"

In addition to positive attention, there is another kind, called negative attention. Reminding, lecturing, explaining, yelling, "dirty" looks, sarcasm, correcting and discussing can all be negative attention. They are negative because they are not pleasant for the child or the teacher, but they are attention because they reinforce the behavior to which they are directed.

"Negative attention" explains why the more the teacher threatens, lectures, or talks to a child about his misbehavior, the more frequently he misbehaves. "Attend" to appropriate behaviors; use a "stick" to deal with misbehaviors.

2. Shaping is a technique to use when the positive behavior a teacher has decided to praise does not occur very often and therefore cannot be reinforced frequently. A child who rarely puts all his toys away, sits quietly or finishes his assignments cannot be praised or earn privileges for such behaviors often enough to have an effect on his behavior. However, every target behavior can be broken down into smaller components or steps, and each component can then be reinforced. This is called shaping. For instance, putting all the toys away can be broken down into putting one toy away, then two toys away, etc. Finishing work can be broken down into sitting quietly while directions are given, starting work promptly, working persistently, etc. When the child demonstrates the "first" step consistently, the slightly larger step can be required of the child. It is important not to move too quickly through the steps; give each piece of behavior enough time to become firmly established. The child needs enough time to learn to trust the fact that he can be acceptable and can receive positive attention consistently.

3. Contingencies, rules and earning privileges are techniques closely related to "withdrawing privileges". However, with the former, the focus is much more positive, and therefore usually more effective in eliciting the desired behavior. Contingencies and rules are "First ..., then ..." situations; i.e., first the child must demonstrate the target behavior, then he earns the privilege. It is important to be very specific and clear about what behavior the child must demonstrate. Being "good" or "minding" to earn playtime in the sandbox is not a specific enough description. Posting classroom rules, making lists of required behaviors, or even demonstrating or "role

playing" with the child the acceptable behavior, are ways to make such communications clear. It is also important that the "step" required of the child is not too big.

There are several categories of consequences or privileges. One kind is called a tangible consequence or reinforcer. These are reinforcers which can be touched or seen, i.e., food, toys, objects. Token reinforcers, by themselves, are of little value, but are reinforcing because they stand for something desired. Money, smiling faces, points on a chart, poker chips, award certificates, etc. are all examples of token reinforcers. Activity reinforcers involve "doing" something such as playing, watching T.V., swinging, riding a bike. Sometimes they involve another person, but not always. Social reinforcers always involve another peson. Attention is one of the primary social reinforcers. Attention can be either positive (praise, compliments, pats on the shoulder, hugs) or negative (yelling, reminding, reasoning, correcting, threatening, discussing, arguing). Sometimes it is difficult to know what a child will find reinforcing. A principle of learning theory says that high frequency behaviors will reinforce low frequency behaviors. Observe the child, and what he spends time doing is what will be reinforcing for him.

Regardless of the kind of consequence, the closer in time the consequence is to the target behavior, the more effective it will be. Moreover, the younger the child, the more important this principle is. Earning time at the puzzle table in the afternoon for sitting quietly at morning story time is not likely to be an effective contingency because the time span between the behavior and the consequence is too long. Token reinforcers can sometimes serve as helpful "bridges"; "sitting quietly" may earn a poker chip, which is turned in later in the day for a privilege.

Cases

We are aware that the following anecdotes are an oversimplification. However, the purpose of our discussion is only to illustrate how some of the "carrots" and "sticks" may be applied.

Case #1

Johnny is a rather small, slightly built, 4-year-old boy who attends a preschool class 5 mornings a week. Although his parents report he talks at home, he appears very shy and rarely speaks at school. When spoken to, he will stare, smile, and nod or shake his head yes or no. Occasionally, in a breathy whisper, he will utter a few monosyllabic words. The other children seem protective of Johnny and treat him like a much younger child.

The target behaviors in this case are decreasing Johnny's lack of verbal response and increasing the amount of appropriate talking he does in the classroom. While "not answering" will be ignored ("the stick"), the "carrot" will be attention and praise for responding appropriately. However, since Johnny only rarely displays the appropriate behavior, his teacher will also have to use "shaping". Johnny will most likely progress in small, successive steps. A plan for Johnny's teacher might be: first, simple compliance with task demands should be rewarded. Thus, Johnny would be reinforced for "good following directions", "good job of finishing that page", "really working carefully", etc. Initially, most of these tasks will be ones which require only a nonverbal response. Johnny should also be asked to communicate directly, but nonverbally, with his teacher by actions such as nodding, pointing, and raising his hand if he knows an answer. He can then be praised: "That's good letting me know what you think!" The next step would be to ask Johnny to respond verbally with one word answers. Initially, his teacher might simply require him only to whisper and then praise him,

"Good telling me", or "Good letting me know what you think!" When he has begun to give brief verbal answers, he can then gradually be encouraged to talk more. The idea is to proceed by reinforcing gradual approximations of the desired behavior.

Case #2

Billy is the class clown. In his kindergarten class, he continually thinks of new ways of getting attention - i.e., falling out of his chair, making noises, and constantly "talking out". Yesterday, when the boys came in from recess and stopped in the bathroom, Billy urinated on the wall.

The first thing Billy's teacher needs to do is to try to totally ignore his silly and disruptive behaviors. When he "talks out" without first raising his hand, his comments should be ignored. At the same time, Billy's teacher should be very alert for instances of appropriate behavior and promptly reinforce these (i.e., "Billy, that's very good remembering to raise your hand"; "I like how quickly you started your work"; "Billy, you are really sitting quietly and doing your work!"). When Billy urinated on the bathroom wall, undoing should have been used - i.e., he should have been required to mop up and wash the lavatory wall himself.

Case #3

Mary's parents have just gotten divorced and she is now living in an apartment with her Mom and little brother. Her teacher describes her as having a "short fuse" and frequently having temper tantrums. (Her anger seems way out of proportion to the provoking event.) The other children include her less and less in their playtime activities.

First of all, Mary's teacher needs to avoid the temptation to focus too heavily on Mary's problems at home. Difficulties at home can certainly

exacerbate poor behavior in the classroom, and it is certainly important for teachers to be understanding. However, children still need to learn to behave appropriately in spite of their problems and, in fact, having the increased structure and preditability at school usually has a calming effect on them. Mary's teacher needs to find a quiet and relatively unstimulating spot in the classroom that she can use for "time out". Then, after she has carefully explained to Mary when "time out" will be used, the very next time Mary has a temper tantrum, she should be calmly and matter-of-factly escorted to the time-out chair. After five minutes, Mary can then rejoin the class activities. At the same time, Mary's teacher should try to notice instances of appropriate behavior and praise Mary for these (i.e., "Mary, I really like the way you are waiting your turn"; "That's very good listening", or "I saw Sally bump you in line and I like the way you talked to her, rather than hit!").

Case # 4

Bob is a friendly, talkative, 5-year-old kindergarten boy. He seems interested in most class activities and has many friends. However, as soon as it is time to sit down and do a "paper and pencil" task (i.e., coloring, cutting, pasting, drawing, or copying), he immediately gets very frustrated and continually "starts over", often crumpling up his paper.

Most likely, Bob's fine motor skills are poor; moreover, he may be a youngster who very much wants to do things "perfectly" the first time. His tolerance for frustration is very low. In order to help Bob learn to work more productively, his teacher might want to use "shaping". First, Bob's paper and pencil tasks should be broken down into smaller, more manageable and less overwhelming units. Next, contingency situations should be utilized as much as possible - "Bob, first you get these three shapes colored, and then

you may have five minutes to play with the guinea pig." At the same time, Bob should be matter-of-factly praised for "Good sticking with it, even when it's hard" and "Good finishing what you started". As Bob begins to demonstrate the ability to complete these small assignments, the length of his work units can then be very gradually increased.

Case #5

Steve is an extremely active, 1st grade boy. His teacher describes him as being "constantly in motion" (i.e., swinging his legs, shifting in his chair, mouthing his pencils, shredding paper, up and out of his seat to get Kleenex, putting his hands all over other children's belongings, and sometimes just plain running around the classroom).

The first job for Steve's teacher is to decide which of the above behaviors takes priority as the "target" behavior. Then, at least for a time, the rest of his annoying (but less disruptive) behaviors will need to be ignored. Most likely, "being out of his seat" will be the first behavior that Steve's teacher will want to deal with. His teacher might want to start with just the one period during the day that he has the most difficulty sitting at his desk and divide that period into 10 minute segments. For every segment that Steve remains at his desk, he gets to put a check mark on a simple chart. If he gets out of his seat, he loses the privilege of putting a check on his chart. Earning a specified number of check marks (token reinforcers) would then entitle Steve to engage in a favorite activity later in the day. A certain number of checks accumulated in a period of one week would result in a short but very positive letter going home to Steve's parents informing them of his success. Throughout the day, whenever Steve demonstrates the ability to stay in his seat, this should be recognized and amply praised, although he will only be on a check sheet for the designated period.

Case #6

Susie is a very bright, verbal little girl. She catches on quickly to whatever task she is supposed to do, and usually is the first one done. But Susie loves to argue. She always has to have the "last word", and her teacher frequently finds herself feeling angry and frustrated after talking with Susie.

There is one important rule to remember about arguing: don't! Once Susie's teacher has stated what she wants done, she should refuse to be enticed into an argument and, instead, should simply walk away or begin to work with another youngster. If Susie continues to follow her about, arguing, she should receive one warning ("That's arguing") and, if she continues, she should then be placed in time-out. (See prior guidelines for the effective use of time-out.)

Case #7

Sarah is a very "sweet", quiet, 2nd grade girl. As soon as directions have been given, she unfailingly is up at the teacher's desk, bottom lip quivering, saying, "I don't know what to do!" or "I don't understand!" Usually, after it is explained to her, individually, Sarah can do the work.

This sort of dependent behavior, while certainly less disruptive than "acting out" behavior, is nonetheless a type of behavior problem that needs to be addressed. Sarah will need a great deal of praise and reinforcement for "listening carefully", "paying attention" and "figuring it out for yourself". She also needs to learn to stay in her seat and raise her hand when she wants help, and a contingency could be used to teach her this behavior. ("Sarah, go back to your seat and raise your hand, and <u>then</u> we'll talk.") Since Sarah usually does not "figure it out herself", and it will therefore be difficult

to reinforce it frequently, her teacher needs to "shape" this behavior. When Sarah protests, "I don't know what to do!", her teacher might start by leading her through a simple series of steps; i.e., "Where are the directions?", "What do they tell you to do?", "Where on the page is the information?", ending with having Sarah tell the teacher what she is to do. During this process, she can be praised for "Good thinking!", "That's careful reading!", and "Good figuring it out!" Once she has been lead through this process a number of times, her teacher might then tell her, "Sarah, I want you to take 5 minutes all by yourself and really try to figure out what you are supposed to do. Then, for as much as she is able to figure out by herself, she should receive praise. Weaning her from being totally dependent on the teacher to increased independence will most likely be a gradual process that will require much patience. The appropriate use of specific praise, shaping, and contingencies, however, should help Sarah learn what her teacher desires, and should also serve to increase her confidence in her own abilities.